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"How do you ... use film viewing to enhance language comprehension?"

Abstract

In this article I will be looking at ways of using films to enhance students' language comprehension, following on from the How do you...? section in the previous issue of *Vida Hispánica*, -henceforth Herrero de Haro (2013)-.

Keywords

you, viewing, enhance, language, comprehension, do, film

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How do you ...?

Use film viewing to enhance students' language comprehension?

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In this article I will be looking at ways of using films to enhance students' language comprehension, following on from the *How do you...?* section in the previous issue of *Vida Hispánica*, -henceforth *Herrero de Haro (2013)*-.

In Herrero de Haro (2013), we saw a list of film viewing exercises aimed at improving our students' analytical skills. Those activities were designed to promote habits amongst learners to make them better listeners. Having done that, we can now apply those skills so that our pupils can enhance their language comprehension skills in a foreign language. In other words, we are trying to change our students' approach to listening activities from a passive to an active role, which in Herrero de Haro (2013) was explained as:

“The starting point will be preventing our students from being passive listeners, (those who sit down and receive language input), to become active listeners, (those who will listen and use certain tools to process language and to maximise the amount of language they understand).

As discussed in Herrero de Haro (2013), “Analytical skills will be the tools that enable our students improve language comprehension”. Therefore, even though analytical skills and language comprehension have been discussed separately in different *How do you...?* sections, it will be important to consider them as two aspects of language learning which go hand in hand.

The following activities are divided in a pre-viewing and a post-viewing section, each of them with a list of suggested exercises which can be used in the language classroom. We could start using these exercises in class once our students have mastered the analytical skills previously introduced, although some teachers might prefer to start by focusing on language comprehension first, and then move on to analytical skills, which might be especially useful with beginners or younger learners.

ENHANCING LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

PRE-VIEWING

Many language learners find listening activities difficult and they can feel anxious about them, so it will be useful to try and make them feel comfortable about these type of exercises. If we have some students that particularly dislike listening activities, we could start using songs from their favourite bands, clips from their favourite films, or interviews with people they admire, and then move on to more intimidating exercises once they feel comfortable with these ones.

Breaking language sequences

My experience as a language teacher and language learner tells me that when we listen to a new language for the first time, we fail to detect word boundaries, and we get the impression that it is all one long and continuous word. That is because sounds are merged in everyday speech, and the end and beginning of words are linked to reduce articulatory efforts. In contrast, when we hear a pre-recorded message at a train station, we can tell that the sounds we hear have been recorded separately and then put together. This sounds unnatural to us because (amongst other things) the word boundaries are not merged. We start breaking down the language sequence as we get better at a language, and not because the rate of speech slows down, but because we recognise more and more word and sentence boundaries and use these to split long sequences of speech into different clauses.

Teachers can help their pupils do this by asking them to write down a list of prepositions, connectors, prefixes, suffixes, morphemic markers (such as *o*, *as*, *os*, *as*, *amos*, e.g. *cantamos*, *altas*), etc. that indicate the end or beginning of a word. We could then do a listening exercise asking students to write examples of these, as focusing on them will make easier for them to break down long sequences of speech. This will help language learners hear the audio not as a long sequence of sound, but as independent clauses, which will aid their language comprehension.

Likewise, it is worth pointing out that Spanish words have only one stressed syllable (except adverbs ending in *-mente*, which have two accents), so language learners can use this to start dividing a long sequence into words: If they hear four stressed syllables in one sentence, the sentence will have four *main* elements (adjectives, nouns, verbs, etc.), and maybe some *short* unstressed words (*si*, *a*, *para*, etc.)

Further details on Spanish pronunciation and articulatory phenomena can be found in Herrero de Haro (2011), Herrero de Haro & Andión Herrero (2011), and in Herrero de Haro & Andión Herrero (2012a, 2012b).

Example: This could be practised using the trailer for the film *Valentín*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNSCElpGXNo>

Focusing on cue words

Students are sometimes overwhelmed with the amount of language in a given listening exercise, failing to focus just on what is important for the answer. To solve this, we could encourage our pupils not to try to understand everything they hear, but to try to listen for cue words.

We could do a listening exercise and tell students to write down five to ten key words that summarise the most important part of the interaction. This will help identify cue words and improve their overall understanding by focusing on the key messages of the conversation. We can then see what everyone has written to compare answers.

After that, we could ask students to summarise the clip in a few sentences.

Example: For this exercise, we could use a scene from the film *Historias Mínimas*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLF-GzZWDoo&feature=related>

Gap filling with scripted listening

We could allow students access to the scripts or to subtitles, so that they can read and listen at the same time. This is especially useful for learners who are good at reading but not as good at listening, as some students hear everything as a long sequence of speech during listening exercises. Reading the script at the same time as they watch the clip will help them break dialogues down into smaller sequences. This will be especially helpful to learn about intonation and about how words are merged in spoken language.

Some teachers do not like showing films with subtitles because they think that it makes students focus more on reading than on listening, but this could be used as a transition from reading exercises to listening ones, in order to familiarise the student with the rhythm and intonation of speech and with longer dialogues.

Example: If we are dealing with beginners, we could use the subtitles of basic conversations such as the ones available on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/>. If we are dealing with more advanced learners, we could always show a bit of the video with subtitles on and then deactivate the subtitles for the rest of the video or scene.

Using rhymes to aid understanding

This is something that we can do when using songs or video clips with beginners. We can delete the last word of every other verse in a song, as missing words will be easier to work out if they rhyme with others at the end of the previous or of the following verse. Apart from helping students work out the missing words, using rhymes will help them get used to certain spelling rules and to certain spelling patterns. This will be especially useful if we use it to drill verb endings.

We will obviously have to adapt this to the level of our pupils. If we are dealing with beginners, we could just leave gaps every few verses, and we could even provide a list of three options per gap. If we are dealing with intermediate groups, we could put the gaps closer to each other and not include any options for these gaps. We could even omit more than one word and indicate how many are missing.

For advanced learners, the missing words do not necessarily have to be at the end of each verse. Furthermore, if we omit more than one word, we will not indicate this, so that students have to analyse the language they hear and break it into smaller sequences to work out how many words are missing.

Example: An example of a song that we could use for this is the song *Pero a tu lado* by Los Secretos. Video available on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5PoEObhv_Y&ob=av2n.

POST-VIEWING

Interiorising the content

After watching a clip, we can draw attention to the grammar and vocabulary used in it. After that, everyone in the class can practise the dialogue in pairs, which will help pupils interiorise the grammar and vocabulary presented in the video. This will help us work on the four language skills.

After practising the dialogue, we can listen to it again, as having done the role play will make it easier to understand what is being said in the dialogue.

Example: Although not exclusively, this approach might work better with beginners, for example, using a clip with a basic conversations available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xh5SN7xo3WY>.

Repetition

I believe that students should always listen to a dialogue or watch a clip again after having marked the exercises. They already have the right answers to the exercises, so they will not feel anxious about listening to a clip. This way, they can now focus on understanding what they missed in the first place, and not only on what they say, but also on how they say it.

Example: We could do this, for example, with the final scenes in *Valentín*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unw4GHGwpm4&feature=related>

Familiarity

This final exercise was also mentioned in Ramos Álvarez (2011), where he suggests showing students clips or videos which they are familiar with. The pupils will be associating naturally what they see and hear with their previous knowledge of the film. Their knowledge of that film is helping them understand what is happening and it is also helping them understand Spanish vocabulary and expressions that would escape them if they did not have any prior knowledge of the scenes. After watching the video, we can ask the students if they have learnt any new vocabulary, as being familiar with the film will make it easier to infer more meanings from the context.

Example: We could show videos or scenes that we believe our students will have already seen, such as an episode of *The Simpsons*, or clips from very famous films. One example of this will be the famous scene in *Shrek* when he says that ogres are like onions.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XMyjsZ1TCQ&NR=1&feature=endscreen>


Differentiation

All these techniques and types of exercises could be used differently depending on the level and age of our pupils. With younger and weaker students, we will ask them to tick, for example, the sport they hear, and with more able learners we will ask them to write the sports they hear in a conversation. Additionally, the type of video that we will use will also depend on the level and age of the group. Generally, language specific videos showing heavily scripted dialogues, such as ordering food in a restaurant, will be better for beginners, while a commercial films will be better for advanced learners.

HOW THESE TECHNIQUES AND EXERCISES CAN HELP OUR STUDENTS BECOME EFFECTIVE LEARNERS.

When talking about *Model of Learning Objectives*, Heer (2009) gives examples about how to take our students through a continuum cognitive process in which they move from lower-order thinking skills to higher-order thinking skills. In other words, students go from working with concrete concepts to working with abstract ones. This is exactly what the techniques and exercises presented here and in Herrero de Haro (2013) do; they try to promote analytical skills to help learners become more independent and work with higher-order thinking skills. That is why some exercises require memorising data, while others ask students to analyse or create their own dialogues.

This will be easier to see if we take a look at the cognitive processes dimension that Heer presents in *Model of Learning Objectives*, which we have adapted into the following table.



Cognitive process dimension	Can the student...	Examples
Remembering	remember the information?	Memorise, repeat, and reproduce.
Understanding	explain ideas or concepts?	Classify, describe, identify, and recognise.
Applying	use the information in a new way?	Demonstrate, dramatise, and illustrate.
Analysing	distinguish between the different parts?	Compare, distinguish, examine, and test.
Evaluating	justify a decision?	Defend, judge, support, and evaluate.
Creating	create a new product or point of view?	Assemble, create, design, and develop.

Table 1: Adapted from Heer (2009) using concepts from Anderson et al. (2001).

If we take a look at the types of techniques and exercises that I have mentioned in this section and in Herrero de Haro (2013), we will see how these cover the six types of cognitive process dimensions.

Enhancing analytical skills	Enhancing language comprehension
Analysing semantic fields	Breaking language sequences
Analysis of regional accents	Focusing on cue words
Compensation strategies	Gap filling with scripted listening
Constructing the setting	Using rhymes to aid understanding
Analysing the spelling system	Interiorising the content
Anticipation	Repetition
Constructing the script	Familiarity

As I said in the introduction to Herrero de Haro (2013), “what I present here is what I have tried and has worked for my students”. These techniques and exercises are what I use in lessons to enhance students’ analytical skills and language comprehension, and I believe that they are highly effective when it comes to making my students better at listening exercises.

I hope that these can also prove helpful to you and your students.

Enjoy teaching!

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Recommended website

There are plenty of examples and advice on how to work with *cognitive process dimension* on <http://www.schrockguide.net/bloomin-apps.html>.